



**AMC 2026**

**Session 3**

**Beyond the Fear Factor:  
Overcoming Imposter  
Syndrome as a Barrier to  
Lawyer Success**

**Presented by:**

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## About the Presenters...

A writer, sociologist, and mental health clinician, **Amber Ault** specializes in helping lawyers and the teams who support them practice with balance, excellence, and resilience. She recently completed 2.5 years as the manager of the Wisconsin Lawyer Assistance Program, and now focuses on offering consulting services to lawyers and LAPs, training mental health workers on supporting legal professionals, and writing a book on the extraordinariness of lawyers and the kinds of support that helps them keep going. Find her at [counselortocounselor.org](http://counselortocounselor.org).

**Brent J. Hoeft** is the Practice Management Advisor for the State Bar of Wisconsin's Practice411™ Practice Management Program. He guides State Bar members on increasing law practice productivity and efficiency and advises on all things law practice management, including legal technology, information security practices, technology competence, employee management, policy and systems implementation, business development and marketing, and improving client relationship management. Prior to his time at the State Bar of Wisconsin, Brent was in private practice since 2006. In 2010, he founded Hoeft Law LLC, Wisconsin's first completely web-based virtual law firm providing legal services in business law, cybersecurity, and estate planning. Brent was also the founder of FirmLock Consulting, LLC, a cybersecurity behavior awareness consulting firm focusing on assisting solo and small law firms with cybersecurity training, education, and implementation of policies and procedures to better protect law firm data. Brent is a frequent presenter on legal technology, practice management, and cybersecurity. Since 2018, he has served as co-chair of the Technology Track for the Wisconsin Solo and Small Firm Conference (WSSFC) Planning Committee and had the honor of serving as the Conference Chair in 2022. Brent received his B.A. in Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and his law degree from Cleveland State University College of Law. He lives in the Madison area with his family, where he enjoys mountain biking, camping, photography, and all things Wisconsin sports.

# **Beyond the Fear Factor: Overcoming Imposter Syndrome as a Barrier to Lawyer Success**

State Bar of Wisconsin

2026 Annual Meeting and Conference, La Crosse, WI

Presented by

Dr. Amber Ault, Close the Gaps Cultural Consulting, LLC and  
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1. What Is Imposter Syndrome/imposter phenomenon?
  - a. Definition and examples of internal thoughts/scripts
    - i. “the situation in which highly accomplished, successful individuals paradoxically believe they are frauds who ultimately will fail and be unmasked as incompetent.” [APA Dictionary of Psychology](#)
    - ii. The phenomenon originally was described in relation to a group of female college students who, despite stellar grades and test scores, nonetheless felt that most or all of their achievements had somehow been the result of chance or error. Follow-up studies showed that men as well as women are susceptible to impostor feelings and that early family conflict and lack of parental support may play an etiological role. (Clance & Imes, 1978)
    - iii. Clinical symptoms often are associated with the phenomenon including
      1. generalized anxiety
      2. depression, and
      3. diminished self-esteem and self-confidence. *Id.*
    - iv. Common Thoughts and Internal Scripts
      1. “I’m a fake”
      2. “I don’t deserve to be here”
      3. “I’m not smart enough to be here”
      4. “It’s only a matter of time before they find out I’m a fraud”
    - v. Prevalence (gather the research here)
      1. There is a wide range of estimates regarding prevalence largely due to measurement variations.
      2. Research on prevalence rates varies widely – 9% to 82% - largely due to differences in the screening tool used and the cutoff for determining impostor syndrome.
      3. Underrepresented groups and minorities are more likely to experience it
      4. The more outside of the norms, experiences and expectations of your upbringing the more likely you are to experience imposter syndrome

- b. Important Clarification on what Impostor syndrome is NOT
  - i. It is not a psychological diagnosis
  - ii. It is not anxiety, depression, or low self esteem
    - 1. Although often is comorbid with these diagnosis
    - 2. All are pieces of impostor syndrome
- c. History
  - i. The term, originally coined as “imposter phenomenon,” comes from a 1978 study by Pailine Rose Clance and Suzanne Ament Imes title *The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention* published in *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*
    - 1. Their sample was focused primarily on white, middle to upper class women, 20-45 years of age who were attending college and graduate programs in the 1970s.
    - 2. Their observations supported other research findings on sex differences in the attribution process where women have lower expectations on ability to perform successfully on a wide variety of tasks versus men.
    - 3. For women, success was attributed to luck or specific effort; for men success was perceived to be due to ability.
    - 4. Clance and Imes noted common experiences across the sample of women studied - familial labeling and pressures, societal expectations, biases, and stereotypes
    - 5. They identified 2 groups “imposters” fall into
      - a. “...women who have a sibling or close relative who has been designated as the “intelligent” member of the family. Each of the women, on the other hand, has been told directly or indirectly that she is the “sensitive” or socially adept one in the family.”
        - i. One part of her believes that myth while the other part of her wants to disprove it
      - b. “Family conveys to the girl that she is superior in every way-intellect, personality, appearance, talents.”
        - i. “In the family members’ eyes, she is perfect.”  
And everything she wants to set out to do she will accomplish with ease.
    - 6. Later research expanded the focus to a wider range of professions, age groups, and demographics, showing that impostor syndrome affects many populations beyond women in college and graduate school. As discussed later in these materials, the studies also identify common patterns of higher impostor syndrome rates among people who are first, only, or different (FOD) in a profession or setting.

- ii. Types of Impostor Syndrome
  - 1. The Perfectionist
    - a. One minor flaw in a nearly perfect performance = failure and shame
  - 2. The Expert
    - a. Expects to know everything so any lack of knowledge no matter how small brings about failure and shame
  - 3. The Natural Genius
    - a. Fact that you have to struggle and work to achieve mastery right away, on your first pass = failure and shame
  - 4. The Soloist
    - a. Think that you should be able to do it all on your own without help of any kind from others. Failing to be able to do so creates shame.
  - 5. The Superhuman
    - a. Falling short in any single roll – spouse, parent, friend, volunteer, coach, lawyer, board member – means that you are a failure and creates shame. Should be able to do it all.
  - 6. *See also:* Dr. Valerie Young program title Rethinking Impostor Syndrome where she describes 5 different types of Impostor Syndrome (*see* The Impostor Syndrome Institute <http://www.impostorsyndrome.com>) and referenced in (Feigofsky, 2022), (Clance & O’Toole, 1987), (Chandra, et al, 2019)

- 2. Why Imposter Syndrome Happens (general causes)
  - a. High Standards and Perfectionism
  - b. A Comparison Culture
  - c. Familial labeling and pressures, Societal expectations, biases, and stereotypes (Clance & Imes, 1978)
  - d. New Professional Roles, Transitions, Challenges
  - e. Lack of Positive Feedback or recognition of it
  - f. FOD (First, Only, Different)
    - i. Made popular in the book *The Year of Yes: How to dance it out, stand in the sun, and be your own person* (2015)
    - ii. Application to Imposter Syndrome
      - 1. First = Lack of role models in a field that come from your circumstances so maybe there is no one there to show you how to navigate your particular situation
      - 2. Only = lack of representation of people in your position creates a feeling of being on an island where no one can relate. “If I am

the only one like me here, maybe I am not supposed to be here, and it is all a mistake.”

3. Different = you don't fit in or you are out of place. Where culture marginalizes certain identities, it can lead to self-doubt and feelings of never good enough.

3. Common features of imposter syndrome (Clance & O'Tool, 1987):

- a. Perfectionism
- b. Dread of evaluation/terror of failure
- c. Defining intelligence in a skewed manner (overestimating others and underestimating oneself)
- d. Guilt about success
- e. Generalized anxiety

4. The Imposter Cycle (Clance, 1985)

- a. Achievement related task is assigned
- b. Anxiety, self-doubt worry set in
- c. Reaction is over-preparation or procrastination followed by frenzied preparation
- d. Completion followed by relief and accomplishment initially but those do not remain
- e. May receive positive feedback but discount positive feedback and deny their success is related to own ability – over prepared success due to the hard work in this one extreme instance, not the ability; or if they procrastinated then success was due to luck
- f. Perceived fraudulence, increased self-doubt, anxiety and depression set in
- g. Wash, rinse and repeat when the next achievement related task comes their way

5. Additional Sources Specific to Lawyers

- a. The Adversarial Nature of Law
  - i. Being challenged is literally the job
  - ii. Even correct arguments are questioned, attacked, and reframed
- b. Training to Spot Risk and Error
  - i. Taught to:
    1. Find flaws
    2. Anticipate worst-case scenarios
  - ii. This same skill turns inward
- c. No Clear “Finish Line” for competence
  - i. Law has:
    1. Constantly changing rules (cases, statutes, regs etc.)
      - a. Grey areas
      - b. Specialization creep
  - ii. Feeling of being “done learning” never happens

- d. The Myth of the Confident Lawyer
    - i. Cultural expectation:
      1. “Lawyers should sound certain - even when the law isn’t.”
      2. Word is taken as gospel, written in stone.
    - ii. Internal doubt + external confidence creates emotional dissonance
  - e. Pressures
    - i. Fear of:
      1. Making a mistake
      2. Letting a client down
      3. Causing real harm
      4. Having to defend a weak case and looking bad
      5. Not living up to expectations of mentors or supervising attorneys
  - f. Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (CIPS)
    - i. 20 question, Likert scale questionnaire used to determine strength of imposter phenomenon (syndrome)
6. The Imposter Cycle and Hypothetical Scenarios
- a. Hypothetical 1: The New Solo
    - i. A lawyer opens their own practice
    - ii. Thinks - “If I were really ready, I’d feel more confident”
    - iii. Discussion Points:
      1. Normalizing discomfort during transition
      2. Competence does not equal comfort, and discomfort does not equal incompetence
      3. Having to tell a client that you are not sure of an answer to their question is ok. Confirming a correct answer is always better than not being sure and providing incorrect answers
    - iv. Why independence amplifies imposter syndrome
  - b. Hypothetical 2: The Experienced Lawyer Taking a New Case Type
    - i. 15 years in practice taking on new matter or practice area
    - ii. Fears asking “basic” questions because he should know this
    - iii. Discussion Points:
      1. Strategic consultation with trusted mentor or colleague
      2. Reframing questions as diligence, not deficiency
      3. Possess the skills to learn and become competent in the matter
  - c. Hypothetical 3: Courtroom Moment
    - i. Lawyer argues a motion and judge asks a question they can’t immediately answer
      1. Internal spiral begins
    - ii. Discussion points:
      1. Reframe: “I don’t have that at hand, Your Honor but will get back to you on it” ≠ incompetence

- 2. Competence includes knowing how to follow up
- d. Hypothetical 4: Comparison at a Bar Event
  - i. Lawyer hears peers discussing the big cases or professional accolades
  - ii. Leaves feeling behind or inadequate or thoughts of not being a “real” lawyer
  - iii. Discussion Points:
- 7. Practical Tools to Overcome Imposter Syndrome
  - a. Recognize it and Name It
    - i. The solution is not to pretend it doesn’t exist but rather to recognize it and become familiar with the reasons and under what situations it is occurring.
  - b. Distress Tolerance
    - i. This is the ability to remain calm and function effectively despite stress, anxiety or emotional discomfort.
    - ii. Ambiguity tolerance, which is a related construct to distress tolerance, is the ability to tolerate situations that are generally ambiguous. This frequently arises in law where there often isn’t a single answer and there are a lot of uncontrollable unknowns that will determine the outcome. “It depends” is not just a lawyer stereotypical response, it is often the reality.
    - iii. Ambiguity tolerance and imposter syndrome have been shown to be positively correlated, and both have been shown to improve with experience. (Carroll & Griech, 2023)
  - c. Evidence Test it
    - i. Ask: What objective evidence supports this belief? What contradicts it?
    - ii. Research shows that it takes nearly six positive comments to compensate for every negative one (Zenger and Folkman, 2013)
    - iii. Tool = Keep a “competence file”:
      - 1. Wins
      - 2. Thank-you emails
      - 3. Positive outcomes
  - d. Normalize Skill Gaps
    - i. Every lawyer has blind spots, learning curves, strengths and weaknesses
    - ii. Not knowing every answer doesn’t equal incompetence
  - e. Reframe Uncertainty as Professionalism
    - i. Ethical practice *requires* caution
    - ii. Confidence without reflection or doubt, is not the goal
  - f. Build a Safe Peer Network
    - i. Mentors
    - ii. Trusted colleagues
    - iii. Therapists or career coaches

1. Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) – [www.wisbar.org/wislap](http://www.wisbar.org/wislap)
  2. Law Office Management Assistance Program (LOMAP/Practice411 - [www.wisbar.org/practice411](http://www.wisbar.org/practice411))
- g. Adjust Internal Language - Reframe
- i. Instead of “I should know this by now” reframe it with: “Continual learning is part of professional growth”
  - ii. “I have no business being here from where I came from” reframe it with: “My unique circumstances and path to here is a valuable different perspective.”
8. Closing: Turning Imposter Syndrome into a speed bump, not a Stop Sign
- a. Imposter syndrome often signals:
    - i. Growth
    - ii. Responsibility
    - iii. Professional seriousness
  - b. Goal is not to eliminate it entirely
    - i. Goal is to:
      1. Recognize it
      2. Prevent it from consuming thoughts and driving decisions
      3. Continue acting competently falling back on skills and experience despite discomfort

## Resources

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